

CAMAJ, Martin

Albanian novelist, poet and scholar. b. 21 July 1925, Temali, Albania; d. 12 March 1992, Lenggries, Germany.

Born and raised in the Dukagjin region of the northern Albanian Alps, one of the wildest and most isolated reaches of Europe, C. was fortunate to receive a classical education at the Jesuit Saverian college in the town of Shkodër. In 1948, soon after the installation of the Hoxha dictatorship, he managed to escape from Stalinist Albania to neighbouring Yugoslavia and studied at the University of Belgrade. From there he went on to do postgraduate research in Italy, where he taught Albanian and finished his studies in linguistics at the University of Rome in 1960. From 1970 to 1990 he was professor of Albanian studies at the University of Munich and lived in the mountain village of Lenggries in Upper Bavaria until his death.

C.'s literary activities over a period of forty-five years cover several phases of development. He began with poetry, a genre to which he remained faithful throughout his life, but in later years also devoted himself increasingly to prose. His first volumes of classical verse, *Nji fyell ndër male* (1953; a flute in the mountains), and *Kânga e vërrinit* (1954; song of the lowland pastures), were inspired by his native northern Albanian mountains to which he never lost his attachment, despite long years of exile and the impossibility of return. These were followed by *Djella* (1958; Djella), a novel interspersed with verse about the love of a teacher for a young girl of the lowlands. His verse collections *Legjenda* (1964; legends) and *Lirika mes dy moteve* (1967; lyrics between two ages), which contained revised versions of a number of poems from *Kânga e vërrinit*, were reprinted in *Poezi 1953-1967* (1981; poetry 1953-1967). C.'s mature verse shows the influence of the hermetic movement of Italian poet Giuseppe Ungaretti (1888-1970). The metaphoric and symbolic character of his language increased with time as did the range of his poetic themes. A selection of his poetry has also been translated into Italian by Francesco Solano in the bilingual edition *Martin Camaj - Poesie* (1985; poetry), into English by Leonard Fox, *Selected Poetry* (1990), and into German by Hans-Joachim Lanksch, *Gedichte* (1991; poems).

The novel *Rrathë* (1978; circles) has been described as the first psychological novel ever to be written in Albanian. It is the author's most extensive prose work, one which he took fifteen years to write. Agron, a writer and agronomist in post-revolutionary 'Arbenia', is sent to the village of Middle Ripa to report on the arrival of some new tractors. There he becomes enthralled with the haunted history of the mountains after saving the life of the wild and beautiful shepherdess Sose, a personification of the mountain nymphs. The 'circles' of water, fire and blood into which the novel is divided symbolize not only metaphysical and social constraints but also the writer's progress through the mythical heritage of Albania's past towards a new and personal future.

Among C.'s other literary publications are a volume of verse entitled *Njeriu më vete e me tjerë* (1978; man by himself and with others), *Dranja* (1981; Dranja), a collection of self-styled madrigals, *Shkundullima* (1981; quaking), a collection of five short stories and one play, and the novel *Karpa* (1987; Karpa), set on the banks of the River Drin in the year 2338, a long prose work which C. preferred to call a parable. General themes which occur in C.'s work are the loss of tradition, loneliness in a changing world, and the search for one's roots. His language is discreet, reserved and trying at times, although the author regarded the term hermetic as coincidental. He relies on the traditional and colourful linguistic fountainhead of his native Geg dialect in order to convey a poetic vision of his pastoral mountain birthplace near the Drin with its sparkling streams and rocky headlands.

In his Munich years, where C. edited and printed most of his literary works, intellectual

circles and his university colleagues in particular were often puzzled and bemused by the linguist who spent much of his time publishing obscure works of fiction in a language nobody in central Europe could understand (and in Geg dialect at that) and for a public consisting of no more than a handful of other Albanian emigrants. C. was an author in exile in every sense of the word and was to remain so until the end of his days. His name remained a taboo in Albania throughout the long years of the communist dictatorship and was never mentioned in public. Indeed until 1991, virtually no one of the younger generation in Tirana had ever heard of him. Nonetheless, he made quite a name for himself abroad as a linguist and as professor of Albanian studies at the University of Munich, publishing numerous works on the history and dialects of the Albanian language and on Albanian folklore.

Over the last decade, C. has finally begun to receive some of the praise and acclamation he was denied as a writer during his lifetime. Arshi Pipa's monograph on *Contemporary Albanian literature* (1991), for instance, is devoted almost exclusively to two authors: Ismail Kadare and Martin Camaj. While many critics have been unbounded in their adulation and praise of C. as an author of national significance, initial reception of his works in fact proved very mixed. Many readers were confused and perplexed by the author's hermetic prose, his borderline genres and a literary style quite new to them. Only time will tell if C.'s works can be appreciated by the Albanian public at large, above and beyond initial curiosity.

FURTHER WORKS: *Në hijen e gjarpnit* (1991); *Pishtarët e natë* (1991); *Kandili argjandit* (1993); *Vepra letrare* (1996).

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Pipa, A., *Albanica. Special issue dedicated to Martin Camaj = Albanica 2* (1991); Pipa, A., *Contemporary Albanian literature* (1991) 125-164; Elsie, R., *History of Albanian Literature* (1995): 680-682; Berisha, A., *Vepra letrare e Martin Camajt* (1995); Berisha, A. "Das literarische Werk Martin Camajs," *Dardania*, 4 (1995), 165-178.

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